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SUBJECT: WASTEWATER GATHERINIG FACILITY FAILS: KUWAITIS  
PUMP UNTREATED SEWAGE INTO THE GULF

Classified By: Econcouns Oliver John for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: In what has become yet another domestic political football, accusations of governmental incompetence and corruption are flying over a malfunction at a major wastewater pumping station in the tony residential district of Mishref. The ongoing sewage spill, which began on or about Aug. 24, has pumped around 180,000 cubic meters of untreated sewage water into the Gulf and affected an off-shore area of at least three square miles, in which swimming and fishing has been banned. Having earlier (and apparently prematurely) announced that the problem had been resolved and posed no risk to Kuwait residents, anecdotal reports of scattered gastrointestinal and respiratory complaints in the area (and lurid warnings from largely uninformed commentators of worse to come) have now left multiple GoK agencies scrambling to accelerate the repair of the pumping station - which earlier reports suggested could take up to one month, during which effluent would continue to flow through the neighborhood's storm vents and into the Gulf. Although it now appears that repairs can be started within days, the failure of a three year old, state-of-the-art gathering station has Kuwaitis looking for someone to blame. A senior Kharafi National official (responsible for emergency response) claims to have warned MPW the week before the spillover that the facility was bound to fail. At MPW request, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) has, on an emergency basis, provided limited technical advice on how best to proceed to halt the spillage, and that help has been positively reported in the local press. Embassy has also provided MPW with information on U.S. engineering firms that could provide expertise. One firm is planning to provide a contract proposal shortly. End Summary.

#### The Plant Fails

12. (SBU) The GoK estimates that 180,000 cubic meters of sewage water have leaked into the streets and waters of Kuwait since Aug. 24. The cause of the malfunction at the Mishref Pump Station remains unclear. The plant, completed in 2006 at a cost of \$160 million, which services the governorate of Hawalli, an area that covers the American Embassy and the American School of Kuwait, has been plagued with operational issues. Ten of its pumps have been immobilized for months with the final three pumps breaking down from the sewage overflow on or about Aug.24. When the pumps failed and with reportedly no bypass structure in place, MPW diverted the 14 meter high sewage water overflow into the Gulf, with Kharafi National taking over the emergency work (i.e., pumping out the sewage). Currently, about 2,600 liters per second of wastewater are flowing into the facility. According to ACE, which was called in by MPW to provide informal advice on how best to solve the crisis (a

fact which received positive comment in the local media, Aug. 31), access points (i.e., manhole covers) to the facility are too small to use large pumps. The GoK is using instead a series of smaller pumps, which are slowly getting ahead of the flow, and the water level could be brought down below the level of the original main underground pumps as early as Aug. 31, allowing for repair of the main pumps and subsequent restart of the facility. (Ad interim, to lessen spillage in the Gulf, tanker trucks are being brought in as of Aug. 30 to remove as much waste- water flow as possible.)

#### The Environmental Impact

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13. (SBU) The spill resulted in GoK calls for reduced water consumption and avoidance of common Gulf activities (swimming, fishing, jet-skiing). Ali Heidar, Vice Chairman for Kuwait's Public Authority of the Environment, publicly described the situation as "abnormal" but also speculated that cleanup would be easy, as "luckily" Kuwaiti waters are shallow, allowing the sun and dry weather to contain the problem. On the other hand, environmental organizations contend the sewage water has polluted Kuwait's drinking water. Warnings issued by Green Line, an environmental NGO, urge against drinking tap water as sewage pollutants could cause outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and other bacterial infections. The GoK has publicly reassured Kuwaitis that drinking water remains safe (and Embassy tests of water provided onto the compound in neighboring Bayan Aug. 31 show no abnormalities). According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, if there are cracks in storm sewer pipes, there could be cross-contamination if drinking water pipes are

nearby and similarly cracked, but the pipes are buried too deeply (100 ft) to tell easily. The Kuwaiti government continues to regularly test the water.

14. (C) The extent of the damage is still unclear. In a phone conversation with Econoff, Heidar stated that while the GoK is estimating the cleanup operation for the Gulf will be over in one to two months, he personally expects it to take up to six months or more. He also stated that the public authority is not certain about the cause of the malfunction and the plant may take weeks to come back online as it is flooded with sewage water and requires electrical and mechanical maintenance. Dr. Mishaal al Misham, Chairman of Kuwaiti Environmental Protection Society (KEPS), stated the he also anticipates a three to six month cleanup process and that the current damage extends at least five miles into the Persian Gulf.

#### What Went Wrong

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15. (C) According to ACE, it appears as if the pumps failed. Once the pumps failed, a gate should have closed, which would have blocked the wastewater flow into the facility, backing up the sewage in the pipe but allowing repair teams access to repair the pumps. However, the gate failed to close, resulting in wastewater levels rising inside the plant, eventually completely covering the pumps and the floor immediately above them. They note that the wastewater pumping and gathering facility was "state of the art." However, the facility appeared to lack failsafe mechanisms, which tracks with the comments of one Kuwaiti engineer that the facility was built with "no-bypass." Although ACE personnel were unable to comment on the report that 10 of the 13 pumps had been non-functional for months, they learned that the maintenance contract for the facility had been switched two weeks earlier. A senior Kharafi National Executive told Ambassador that the company had warned MPW "in writing," a week before the disaster, that it was only a matter of time before the facility flooded. He asserted that MPW and the construction contractor, United Gulf Construction Company, were partners in the "crime" of letting the situation develop.

Comment: A Bad Summer

16. (C) The current sewage spill is the most recent summer "karitha" (disaster) to affect Kuwait, following on the Jahra fire (which killed over 45 people) and the H1N1 flu pandemic (which has killed 5 nationals). Given the relative newness of the facility, its apparent design flaws, the reported lack of maintenance, and the fact that the MPW reportedly started to use it without formally signing its acceptance of the project from the building contractor, many Kuwaitis are looking for someone to blame, and are assuming - often publicly - that graft and corruption must be involved. Although the October reconvening of the Parliament is not yet at hand, the summer has already produced a number of issues suitable for parliamentary "grilling" of government ministers, and the Mishref station failure will likely figure high on the list of topics under consideration by those legislators spoiling for a fight with the government. End Comment.

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